

AD 634797

UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL RESEARCH IN SEAPING
POLICY DECISIONS

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P-2289

April 24, 1961

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The following paper is to be delivered
at the forthcoming AAPOR meeting at the
University of California, Berkeley,
California, on May 6, 1961.

UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL RESEARCH IN SHAPING POLICY DECISIONS

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The extent to which scientific advice is being utilized by government varies considerably from one field to another. Insofar as the social sciences are concerned, economic policy is the field in which we find the most constant, systematic, and extensive utilization of scientific theory, of applied research, and of scientific methods of fact-finding and analysis. In this field, the mapping of policies as well as their execution is largely in the hands of trained economists and of scientifically trained practitioners.

One might mention another branch of the social sciences whose role is even more pervasive, that of law. Since all governmental policy is intimately tied up with law-making as well as with the application of existing law, one may say that policy-making takes place in the medium of law. But the law which suffuses policy-making is a "scientific" pursuit in a very different sense from the style of activity observed in the more academic, theoretically more vigorous sciences. Law has to do more with the application of a set of practical rules than with methodical research into an independent realm of facts.

There are many fascinating problems involved in the application of economic science to questions of policy. Economics as a science deals with optimization problems -- the best allocation of resources, their most complete utilization, their optimal rate of growth, and so on. Yet economics, as a discipline, cannot provide criteria for the "best" economic policy from the point of view of the entire society. It can indicate how one can optimize the working of the economy in one or the other dimension, but must admit that a policy which is optimal in one respect may be less than optimal in another respect. The question of what to optimize, then, has to be decided on other than strictly scientific grounds. The decisions one makes depend on his particular definition of the over-all, or social, optimum, with economic science as such being neutral as between alternative definitions.

Nor is this all. Decisions affecting over-all economic policy depend not only on different conceptions of the social optimum, but also on the political power behind demands rooted in sectional and private interests. Policies which conflict with every conceivable definition of the over-all optimum that has some standing in economic science may nevertheless prevail because of the decisive political influence of their sponsors. This severely limits the degree to which advice from the economist, particularly of the "free-floating" academic economist,

will actually shape policy. Academic economists can be clear-headed and detached about the economic facts of life; they can say, for example, that a given policy goal -- say, the allocation of more resources to defense production -- entails such and such a curtailment of consumption. But people, singly and in groups, will resist any suggestion that this requirement of curtailment applies to them. In practice, the burden of curtailment will fall on those who cannot protect themselves against inflationary pressure upon their purchasing power.

In economic policy, we have a situation such that most decisions are politically controversial because they affect private and sectional interests differentially. In other words: controversies about economic policy are concerned with the goals to be pursued, rather than with the means to adopt in pursuing uncontroversial goals. This puts the economist in an anomalous situation as a scientific adviser. The authority of science rests to a large extent upon its impartiality, upon its aloofness from sectional interests. Scientific advice therefore can be really authoritative only where it is seen as serving to promote uncontroversial, generally accepted goals. Since, however, the subject matter of economics is deeply bound up with some of the most pervasive and stubborn divisions of interest in the society, it

is difficult for the economist, both to work out an impartial position and to put his advice across when he does.

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All this is more or less familiar. The utilization of research and analysis by economists is standard governmental practice, and the limitations placed upon the policy-shaping role of the economist likewise are part of the normal scheme of things. It is when we turn to the other social sciences -- sociology, social psychology, anthropology, political science -- that we find open problems, uncertainties, and unknown possibilities. These sciences themselves are still in an inchoate fluid state; they neither have a well-established theoretical base nor many regular avenues of application. Because of this, and for some other reasons as well, their role in shaping and informing governmental policy is in no way institutionalized. When they insert themselves into the policy-making process -- as they did in connection with the Supreme Court decision on desegregation in 1954 -- it is news. This happens, more often than not, on an ad hoc basis. And it happens in a number of different ways.

We can distinguish, in general, three ways in which scientific theory and research can be used for the purposes of formulating and informing governmental policy. One may be called the

"discipline" approach: experts versed in a discipline draw upon the existing body of knowledge (including recent discoveries) in generating policy-relevant advice. This approach is reflected, as a rule, in the policy application of the older, mature, well-developed sciences, including economics. The second variant of policy utilization of research may be called the "project"

approach: here new scientific knowledge is being acquired with a practical goal in mind. This approach is often the only one available to workers in the less well-developed sciences, including the social sciences other than economics. The third approach is an indirect and informal one. Governmental policy is being influenced, in ways that are hard to specify, by scientific theories and analyses that become part of the general culture and exert an educational influence upon groups and people directly participating in policy-making.

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The discipline approach has relatively few instances in the policy utilization of research in the newer social sciences. Applied social science, "social engineering," is a slogan rather than a reality. The discipline approach is exemplified, for the most part, by the policy application of scientifically developed techniques and procedures (such as statistical sampling methods)

rather than of scientifically developed and tested hypotheses and theories. There are research results of a statistical nature which lend themselves to policy application -- for example, parole prediction studies. But when social scientists attempt to analyze factors relevant to the political process itself, such as the distribution of political attitudes, their findings are not likely to be utilized in policy-making. It is one thing to study those factors, and another to control them.

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The major avenue toward the policy application of research in the newer social sciences is undoubtedly the project. It has to be used since, in most cases, there is no other alternative. But it is a profoundly problematic one. The idea of applied science presupposes the existence of a general theory from which particular conclusions, applicable to a practical problem, can be deduced. The project approach does not correspond to this schema. It is being used to solve problems which lie outside the scope of existing general theories. A policy-relevant project typically consists in getting together all the facts about a field which the policy-maker ought to know in order to make the best possible decision. This may be eminently worthwhile: many mistakes can be avoided, and many successes can be scored, if the

decision-maker knows the facts about the situation with which he has to deal. But this has nothing to do with the application of scientific theory. At most, it may involve the application of scientific procedures, such as scientific sampling methods.

This does not mean to say that all scientific projects undertaken with policy application in mind necessarily remain on the level of mere fact-finding. Some of them do advance scientific theory. The most monumental project of this kind, reported in the volumes of The American Soldier, has made a considerable contribution to basic theory and methodology. Yet, the limitations of the project approach are apparent even in this case. The starting point of the investigation was the problem of combat morale, and on this the most valuable insights came to light, but the investigation was inevitably focused upon the sub-culture of the army, and the over-all cultural background had to be slighted. What we have is, then, apart from the methodological gains, an illuminated segment of relatively low-level generalizations, the higher-level regularities that would give them their place in a system remaining in darkness.

Policy-oriented projects are usually set up to deal with novel policy problems arising in extraordinary situations and unfamiliar, cross-cultural settings. The three main areas of policy-relevant social science projects of our time were war,

military government, and cold war. In the first two areas, most projects had to do with the problem of running large, improvised organizations operating under pressure. Scientific policy advice had definite practical value notably in improving the management and functioning of the armed forces, not only as regards combat morale but also as regards such practical problems as the control of venereal disease, interracial relations, and psychiatric screening.¹

Military government in the defeated countries did utilize scientific area research to some extent, but it operated, on the whole, without understanding for the subject populations and their culture. American military government was, on the whole, successful in that it maintained order and laid the groundwork for remarkably good economic recovery in all the occupied countries. But it also created deep resentments, particularly at the beginning, and it showed a marked tendency to introduce American ways which jarred with the outlook and feelings of the subject populations. This shows that scientific advice based upon knowledge and understanding of the foreign cultures in question was

¹Effective Use of Social Science Research in the Federal Services, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1950, pp. 14 ff.

either not available or not heeded. There seems to have been one area, however, namely, Okinawa, where considerable use has been made of area studies in running the military administration.²

In the postwar period, area studies have been tremendously expanded, largely with a view to provide guidance for cold war policies. "There are now almost a hundred area centers or institutes studying the Soviet Union, the Middle East, South Asia, East Central Europe, Africa, East Asia, and Latin America."³ How much of this extensive research activity is being utilized for policy determination, and in what way, is, however, difficult to determine. The use of expert knowledge is most widespread and regular in the field of help for the underdeveloped countries. There, however, most of the policy problems tackled with the help of experts are in the field of economics.

²Milton D. Graham, Federal Utilization of Social Science Research: Exploration of the Problems, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D. C., August 1954, pp. 31 ff.

³Philip E. Mosely, "Research on Foreign Policy," in Research for Public Policy, Brookings Dedication Lectures, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D. C., 1961, p.

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There would be considerable room for applying research results in one area of the cold war -- information and propaganda. Two branches of research are relevant to this problem area: communications theory and the sociology of culture. In order to inform our policies in this field, the results of the two ought to be combined. In other words, our practice ought to be guided by well-grounded assumptions about what makes communication effective (or rather, what effects communication can and cannot achieve, depending on the general situation and the procedures used), as well as about the target culture which is to be influenced. Our actual practices, however, do not satisfy these requirements, partly because our scientific theories are not developed well enough in this respect, and partly because the principles governing policy here, too, are incompatible with the objectivity of the scientific approach. To put it in a nutshell: what we say often has no impact, or a negative impact, because we can say only what we ourselves like to hear, what is maximally flattering to our ego, our amour-propre, our idealized image of ourselves, our shibboleths.⁴

⁴Research about the effectiveness of communication is ably summarized in Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1960. The book presents a

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A few words about the indirect and informal utilization of scientific research for policy. Whatever direct policy application there is of specific social science research findings, it is undeniable that the thinking of social scientists, and particularly of the major figures among them, influences the thinking of policy-makers. It is hard to say how profound this influence is. What we observe time and again is that the condensed result of theoretical analyses is picked up in sloganized form and enters into policy. Some examples of this are, for our own society, "pluralism," "One World," "open society," "containment," "protracted conflict." Other cultures have other sloganized precipitates of research and theory: "le pays réel," "organic community," "culture versus civilization," "class society," "dialectical materialism," "circulation of elites," "massification."

It is not always the best thinking about social and political reality that is summarized in these slogans, and even so, the value of the original intellectual achievement is debased in the

number of valuable findings about the effectiveness of communication as a psychological problem. The radical deficiency stemming from self-centeredness is not touched upon -- it is beyond the purview of the research activity going on in this field.

process of condensation and sloganization. Yet, this assimilation of the residue of thought processes is what gives policy-making whatever intellectual breadth and depth it has. Policy could be improved if the policy-makers reflected more on the context of the slogans and came to grips with their significance, their difficulties, their limitations.

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To conclude, let me turn briefly to the basic issue involved in the problem of the utilization of social research for governmental policy. This is that of the "scientific method" as the only radical cure for the ills of society -- tension, conflict, war. Man, we often hear, has essentially solved the problem of controlling his material environment, and it is the application of the scientific method that has enabled him to achieve this. The uncontrolled forces of his human and social environment, however, threaten him with disaster. The thing to do, then, is to apply the scientific method to the human, social world; it is in this way, and this way alone, that the destructive forces at work in human groups, made immeasurably more threatening by advanced technology, can finally be brought under control and self-destruction can be averted.⁵

⁵This view about the scientific method as the master key for solving human problems goes back, in its modern version, to John

From this general idea two corollaries follow. One is that the social sciences, now lagging behind the natural sciences, must be brought up to the latter's level: they must adopt the same standards of rigor, objectivity, quantification. The other corollary is that as the social sciences advance, the solution of policy problems must be turned over to them.

This approach commands wide assent in the academic world, in the general public, and to some extent also in government. I believe, however, that it is a fundamentally mistaken one. For one thing, it is an illusion to believe that the natural-science standards of rigor, objectivity and quantification, applied to the social and human environment, will give us the same degree of theoretical understanding, and the same capacity for control, as natural science provides with regard to the material environment. For another, the process of policy-making takes place in a power universe. To take charge of policy, the scientists should conquer political power first. This, however, is something they cannot do under the democratic rules of the political game, nor can they do it on a nondemocratic, dictatorial basis.

Dewey's philosophy. For a recent statement of this position, see Barbara Wootton, Testament for Social Science, Norton, New York, 1951.

Objectivity and impartiality are the hallmark of the scientific attitude, while the pursuit of power requires the opposite. There is no way of making these two concerns coincide. All that can be achieved is some penetration of the unbiased and rational scientific spirit into the realm of policy-making, and the more of it the better. The power process indeed needs to be tamed and informed by real knowledge. But we must guard against equating real knowledge with scientific knowledge. The knowledge of the humanist, the philosopher, the artist, and the religious believer is also needed to "inform" policy, and to "inform" the thinking of those on whom the shaping of policy ultimately depends -- the people at large.